

Return, Rebuild, Renewal: Reflections from Nehemiah Nehemiah chapters 1 – 8

Introduction

Almost 1600 years ago Jerusalem lay in ruins, its people exiled to Babylon. Nehemiah is in the service of the foreign ruler who conquered it. He finds himself in a position of trust and influence. The news of broken city walls, a broken people, destitution, and economic and spiritual breakdown of those left behind, break Nehemiah's heart before the Lord and directs his prayer in mourning, tears, fasting and repentance. His prayer is grounded in his trust in God, and the covenant promises of God to gather, *restore and bring to the place I have chosen as a name for my dwelling* (Neh 1.8-10). The Lord paves the way for Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem, and amidst opposition and factions, with faith and resolve he oversees the re-building and restoration of the city. His trust in the face of opposition holds firm: *The God of heaven will give us success* (2.20). His team undertake different tasks, the work gets completed and the exiled begin to return. A day of gathering takes place, the prophet Ezra reads the law; there is worship and weeping. The people of God are encouraged to dry their eyes, to mark the day as sacred to the Lord, to celebrate God's restoration of his city and people. *This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength.* (8.10)

Nehemiah – The Context

It's around 450 BC. A remnant population remained in Jerusalem and those exiled hadn't returned from Babylon. Jerusalem is a broken city, ruined. The people are broken, and there is economic and spiritual breakdown. Nehemiah is in Susa, in the service of King Artaxerxes and hears about the terrible state of Jerusalem – He is cup bearer to the King

Nehemiah's Prayer 1. 3-10

³They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." ⁴When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. ⁵Then I said:

"LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. ⁷We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

⁸"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' ¹⁰"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. ¹¹Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man."

Reflections for a post pandemic church

As the national vaccination programme continues, and infection rates decline, our communities and the church in the midst of community, are now beginning to navigate the return to a more familiar pattern of life. But we are aware that the effects of the pandemic will be long reaching, long lasting, well beyond any return to a 'new normal'. As followers of Jesus, we are aware that the church needs to listen afresh to the Spirit of God, to reflect on what the Spirit is drawing our attention to, as God seeks to do a new thing in our times. The church has continued to worship and be agents for mission over the past year; and we are now seeking to discern how Jesus' commission and call to us as disciples, is to shape us and our churches, for future mission and ministry in a post pandemic society.

Linked to Bishop Christopher's themes of Recovery, renewal and resurrection are three related aspects from the book of Nehemiah that we have been invited to reflect on together at the Bishop's Council Day Away: Return, Rebuild, and Renewal

Return – How do we 'return' to church, our wider mission, to what we were doing before the pandemic?

Rebuild – How do we 'reconstruct' church for the future mission of God's people?

Renewal – How are we to continue to respond to the invitation of God to be ambassadors for Christ in the ministry of reconciliation, builders for the Kingdom of God, and 'commission holders'?

RETURN involves prayer with a deep trust in the Lord, opportunities for rest, and the need of a true and accurate assessment of the task ahead

a) PRAYER - Nehemiah's response to what he hears and how he acts - is Prayer led and prayer soaked, rooted in his faith in Yahweh the covenant God of Israel

Tears, fasting and Prayer 1. 4-10 – Trust in God's covenant promise – *'servants of God whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand' and a promise to gather his people back to and bring them to a dwelling place for His name - Jerusalem*

- *Lament – V4: for what has been lost, broken, destroyed, broken-heartedness*
- *Representational Confession - Nehemiah names and owns the whole story including himself in Israel's past 'sins' (vv 6b-7)-I confess we Israelites, including myself & my father's house have committed against you ...*
- *Turning to God – (vv 5a, 8-9 - Repentance – and recounting in prayer God's promise of restoration **and his** Trust in this promise of restoration – Yahweh is a God of Covenant; God is faithful*

(Echoes of 1 Chronicles 29. 10- 13 David's great prayer – *The power of God is the source of all strength* and Ps 68.35 – *You are awesome O God...you give power and strength to your people. And 2 Chronicles 7.14 – If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land)*

The prayers of Nehemiah are woven throughout the book and inform us that he is a leader who builds resilience, strength and vision on his trust in the faithfulness and providence of God.

The King notices Nehemiah's 'dis-ease' concerning his home land and asks him for the reason behind it. Nehemiah prays first, and then he asks to return. (2.1-5)

God employs the hospitality and partnership / good will of significant partners who are in the wider community, people of influence (People of peace) – Hospitality of those beyond the immediate church community. (The King will provide Nehemiah with resources for rebuilding) – 2.7-9. Nehemiah recognises the providence and grace of God in this.

b) The 'Return phase' requires rest followed by assessment of the landscape in order to evaluate the challenge ahead, invitation to others, and will need handling and management of 'old tensions' (2. 10 – 20)

Background

2. 10 – Old enemies: Sanballat & Tobiah (Haronites / Ammonites were not fans of the Jews!)

Trouble lies ahead – we don't know at this point if Nehemiah is aware of this opposition but he soon will be. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem and surveys the extent of the problem (2.11-16)

Horonites: Beth Horon 18 miles NW of Jerusalem– Sanballat named after 'moon god'. Governor or hoping to be Governor of Samaria – wanted wider control – Judea. Mixed religious practices.

Ammonites: Origins, East of Jordan – Early conflict between Israel and Ammon; Israel had been defeated by Ammonites / Philistine coalition. Jephthah had vowed to sacrifice first person he saw on return from battle if victorious – only child his daughter (Judges 10). Later both Saul and David defeat Ammonites

RESTING – 2.11 *I went to Jerusalem and after three days I set out during the night with a few men*

ASSESS – *I had not told anyone what God had put in my heart to do*

Nehemiah doesn't say much – he wants to get the lie of the land, to get a true and accurate picture in order to assess the extent of the challenge –

Nehemiah is person of prayer, and great trust in the promises of God – and so following his rest and assessment, vision builds, - Come let us rebuild the wall...(he encourages)..I told them about the gracious hand of God upon me ... (his testimony builds trust, engagement of others as he invites others to join in (Mission is seeing where the Spirit of God is at work and joining in RW) ...They replied 'Let us start this good work'

In face of early opposition – trust – What are you doing!?! – The God of heaven will give us success

We get a hint and will later see that this Prayer and Trust build the resilience that Nehemiah needs to draw on to get the job done

Nehemiah's Strength stems from his trust in the Lord – His lived experience in the face of challenge, difficulty, threat is to know - the joy of the Lord is his strength (He says later in 8.10)

Questions: Return – how do we 'return' to church, our wider mission, to what we were doing before the pandemic?

- How do we manage depleted energy, anger, grief, unrealised vision?
- How do we build physical and spiritual strength? How do we re-grow spiritual health? (Illustration - after muscle wastage)
- What do we re-engage with, pick up and what do we leave?
- Resilience can be built through lived experience; how has our lived experience as the people of God equipped us for what lies ahead?
- What issues, challenges, or opportunities have had to be 'parked' over the last year? How will we engage with them as we return?
- What have we learnt in the past year about ourselves, our community, our churches that speak of new opportunities to our life and mission?
- What are the fears we need to name?
 - For ourselves?
 - Our congregations and wider community?
 - Financing our mission?
 - For our part in being a disciple discovering and growing church?

REBUILD – Shared vision, priority setting, partnership (teams), opposition, cost and sacrifice

a) Vision shared and a partnership of teams commissioned

2. 17 -20 - Nehemiah draws on his trust in the Lord and shares his objective (Vision) even in the face of initial opposition and mockery from Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, he gains strength of purpose from his trust in God who will bring success to the project: *The God of heaven will give us success....* (2.20)

Chapter 3. PROVIDES a list of teams and their tasks, the breadth of involvement. A wide measure of engagement

- Leaders – Priests, nobles, officials – different responsibilities
- Skilled and unskilled

Initial Opposition - 2.19 As rebuilding is about to begin opposition is made known – Sanballat, Tobiah & Geshem mock, ridicule and attempt to sow fear – Opposition raises its head again later, and we'll see how that is handled

Opposition can be external or from within – what does that look like for us? How can we handle it constructively in our desire to mission together as a Diocesan family of church? Fear of loss, change and identity are just few of the triggers for 'opposition' – how do we listen well, handle with grace and love and yet invite others to become part of the re-build team? Differences of opinion to a 'post-covid' are listened to and worked through, prayed through in the understanding that we are all on the same 'team', members of Christ's body.

Getting on with the job ...Teams – Varied

Re-building – as a community (team– different jobs for different people, but a common shared vision, each literally watching the back of others, swords at the ready. Willing to be a sacrifice for others.

It is easy to be parochial and narrowly focused on our immediate context – but others in community don't always see our boundaries. So what possibilities for wider co-operation and partnership might exist to explore in evangelism, discipleship and nurture, mission in the local community? The fields are ripe to harvest, workers are few, pray to the Lord of the harvest for workers – it's others of course – but this is a prayer about ourselves too.

A body with different gifts – how do we continue to release the mission energies of the whole people of God?

b) What is the priority in building? – unless the Lord builds the house those who labour do so in vain

3. 1 *Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place.*

The Sheep Gate is the first to be repaired – There are two important priority messages here. Firstly that spiritual leaders set an example of talk and walk, word and action – showing leadership. Second message but the one that underlines any rebuilding work is that of putting God first – this gate is nearest the temple. Animals for temple sacrifice would arrive. The gate is completed and consecrated and sets the heart of encouragement and commitment to all.

Nehemiah's earlier prayers had included a confession that Israel had de-prioritised their first call – to love and serve the One True God (Deuteronomy – basis of Law)

Jesus invites builders for the Kingdom to seek God first, to make his rule our first priority Matthew 6.33 and in 7.24 – Jesus paints a picture of wisdom in the Kingdom of God - Wise or foolish builders – seek first the Kingdom. This is a reference to building on the true 'Cornerstone' Ps 118. The apostle Peter, writes to the early church facing challenging times calling them to be built as a 'Royal Priesthood', coming to Jesus, the Living Stone (1 Peter 2.4-9).

Peter also references Ps 118 suggesting that the essential building of God's people is less about a physical building but more to do with his people, each hosting the essential presence of the Spirit of Jesus. One thing we have re-discovered during the pandemic is that, although our buildings are precious and important, we are the living temple.

How do we continue to 'build' for the future mission God is inviting us to be in partners in, without wanting to simply re-construct and return to everything we did before?

And in our rebuilding, how do we seek God's vision rather than a world vision? What we attempt might seem foolishness viewed through the secular lens. And the strong pull of an institutional church may also create added tensions. St. Paul reminds the church that the wisdom we seek to live in and build within, may often be described as foolishness in the eyes of the world, yet he invites us to become fools for Christ. God's foolishness is greater than human wisdom.

c) Shared task with a unity of purpose or shared vision

The priests make a good start but they can't do everything – the scale of the task is immense. The success of the enterprise depends on a team of builders with a unity of purpose. The team comprises, skilled and unskilled, armed security guards (we might call these the intercessors today) – needed in case of an attack from enemies or disruptors of this vital mission.

The gifts of the whole body of Christ are needed in every generation. Prayer and Praise are the central activity that shape our vocation. Paul's description of the church as a body, and each member bringing specific gifts and talents has still more exciting discoveries in store. Our rebuilding presents a fresh opportunity to recognise and release God's people as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4. 11-13) in unity of purpose, to build up the body of Christ.

Paul also describes this vital task of mission needing to be built on Jesus as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2.20)

d) Opposition and response to it - God's enemies seek to undermine God's will

The opposition continues – 4.1-3, 4.7-8 6. 1-7: As the rebuilding work progresses.

How does Nehemiah respond? Prayer, rally and recall, vigilance and remaining intentional or focused.

- i) Prayer – again! - Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own head....(4.4)***

- ii) Rally & Recall** - (Draw strength from one another and from God) – *I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people; “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your homes”*. (4.14)

(cf Paul and co – strengthen congregations by visiting and staying – Acts 15.36-41, 18.18-23, 20.1-6)

- iii)** Press on but remaining alert and prepared – jobs shared: *From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armour* (4.16). Watchmen were posted and those who worked also carried a weapon. The alarm was ready to be sounded (4.17-23)

e) Costly or sacrificial work which came with its disappointments too

The work force came from a wide number of locations – Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, Zanoah, Beth Hakkerem, Beth Zur, and Keilah. Hard pressed people with more than enough on their plate, farms, fields, and families. Sacrificial giving is vital to God’s mission.

Not everyone got involved! Whilst many nobles got involved many didn’t either – beneath them, pride? (Tekoa). Isaiah 43 – See I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it? Prioritisation of work with the coalition of the willing is perhaps the most fruitful approach with limited resources.

Jesus spoke about the cost of being a disciple (Luke 14. 25-35) – carry our cross, illustration of a tower building project – estimate the cost of completion.

f) Not forgetting the poor – Nehemiah is leading for change, for rebuilding but this isn’t at the expense of detriment of the poor or marginalised

Nehemiah needs the strength of character to challenge the injustices he hears of. Furthermore when Nehemiah is made Governor he uses his position of political strength to redistribute wealth and make life easier for those who had been under intolerable financial burdens.

People are borrowing money at high interest rates, ‘Loan sharks’ operating (Neh 5), poor struggling to find food, people mortgaging fields, homes, selling families into slavery.

g) And still the opposition continues – Neh 6. 1-7

Five times in all Sanballat & co attempt to undermine Nehemiah’s work (*The fifth time Sanballat sent his assistant to me with the same message* (6.5)).

- i) Prayer** – again! - But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands” (6.9)
- ii) Stands his ground** – “Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!” (6. 10-13) – (cf Ephesians 6 – armour of God)
- iii) Uses discernment and wisdom to thwart opposition that will seek even his life** (6.12) – *I realised that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. (cf The spiritual gifts God gives to spiritual strength 1 Cor 14)*

Rebuilding requires resilience, faith, trust, wisdom. (Trust / hope / wait – Isaiah 40.31 – *Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength ...* / 2 Cor 12. 8-10 – When I am weak I am strong)

Jesus in Gethsemane provides the ultimate model in waiting on God for strength to endure.

Paul – *I can do all things through God who strengthens me* Phil 4.13 – And – Eph 3.16: *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being*)

Strength and 'success' come from God's strength

Finally, the work on the wall is completed – those in opposition are afraid and lose their self-confidence because: *"They realised that this work had been done with the help of our God"* (6.15-16)

Thank God for the breakthroughs!

For fans of the TV programme Master Chef, I must say that I really don't get the 'deconstructed' apple Pie. It has all the ingredients for an apple pie, but it isn't apple pie!

Nehemiah's rebuilt wall will look both different and yet it is still a wall.

The church must look different and yet it must still be the church, with Jesus at the centre, seeking the bring Glory to God through Him, and to make him known by the manner of our love and service to the world God created and is making new. Our rebuilding must be God's construction project and vision and not a human construct. How do we ensure we keep the 'core' ingredients of the church? And how do we discern what is simply culture and tradition, and what aspects of culture and tradition are 'life giving' or act as potential barriers, things that raise the threshold?

Rebuild – how do we 'reconstruct' church for the future mission of God's people?

- Master Chef – deconstructed apple pie – all the essential ingredients but it doesn't look an apple pie Danger of deconstructing rather than re-construct? Church can look different but must have key ingredients, and still be recognisable?
- How can we ensure we build on Rock vs Sand, to be wise, to not reject the Cornerstone?
- How might we focus on rebuilding without neglecting our call to serve the least and marginalised among us?
- What are the key 'building materials'? – The essentials? Living Stones?
- What sort of structure? Local, diocesan, national?
- What is the cost?

RENEWAL

Chapter 7.0 - The building work is completed and thousands begin the return journey to Jerusalem and surrounding towns. There will still be more work to do, but now is a time to gather, to reflect, to be reminded again of God's faithfulness and to listen to God's word, to value God's word and to appropriate God's word to set out a spiritual renewal of a nation.

There is an amazing scene described as crowds gather, Ezra the scribe opens the book of God's law, readings and teaching, and worship – *they gave meaning so the people could understand*. There is a sense of having been starved of the word in exile, they receive, they respond in worship and tears.

God's help (strength) is acknowledged in the worship of the people. There was weeping as they responded to the words of the Law – perhaps recognising – their own brokenness / the covenant promises of God / the requirements of Torah and how they had lost strength and heart.

Nehemiah: *“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* (8.10)

There is a rediscovery of the Festival of booths / tabernacles, the annual event of remembering deliverance, journey from Egypt to Canaan, the Promised Land, with a powerful visual re-enactment. There is an appetite, a hunger to hear and respond to God. God hears the cry of his people, God delivers, God provides, God leads the way. Jesus draws these great themes in the Lord's Supper and the church re-tells the story when we break bread.

Confession, repentance, worship and the re-telling of the story of God; Creator and sustainer, source of life, God's sovereignty, God's leading, God's Spirit to instruct, and God's provision.

It is a spiritual 're-booting', a re-loading of the 'theological and spiritual operating system', a re-setting of the worship life a nation towards the One True God and to serve God as his people are faithfully loved and served in return.

- ***A disciple is one who follows Jesus, is being changed by Jesus, and is committed to the mission of Jesus*** - Jim Potman – *Real life discipleship*

If *“church is what happens when people encounter the Risen Christ and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with others”* (Rowan Williams), what might renewal look like for us?

Walter Brueggeman in *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* describes three groups of people, who, following our mission and call to be good news and share good news will become followers of Jesus, who become disciples who grow a mature and living faith, and invite others on the journey.

- The 'Outsider' to 'Insider'
- Forgetter to 'Rememberer'
- Beloved children become Belief-ful Adults

In our own faith life we recognise times when we have identified with one of these descriptions. It is the tension we experience in growing to maturity as the Body of Christ. If renewal is being or recovering an attitude of a new or fresh (every-day) openness to the work of the Holy Spirit, then we have reached a new growing point in living out our Baptismal call or promises. And for the church collectively it will birth fresh confidence in our faith and living with Gospel values.

St Paul describes one aspect of what renewal looks like in God's people in Galatians 5.22-23. He also employs the imagery of spirit filled life, life = walking with or by, the Spirit, renewal, is of walking hand in hand, step by step and heart in heart with the Spirit.

What are our hopes for spiritual renewal for the family of church in our Diocese? For ourselves?

How might we describe our dream, our vision of a renewed church / diocese?

What will our discipleship as Ambassadors, Builders, and Commission holders look like?

Renewal – How are we to continue to respond to the invitation of God to be ambassadors for Christ in the ministry of reconciliation, builders for the Kingdom of God, and ‘commission holders’?

- If we are to be ambassadors and builders for the Kingdom, what does a revitalised, re built church look like? And how do we continue to grow as healthy churches?
- What will spiritual renewal in ourselves and across our diocese look like?
- How do we walk step in step, hand in hand with the Spirit in this undertaking?

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